

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Speaker 1: Recording.

Interviewer: Okay, so January 1st, New Year's Day '49 is a Saturday, and I understand in most places in Wyoming, it's not too bad of a day. The weather forecast for the next day is calling for partly cloudy skies, maybe highs in the 30s and some snow flurries. Then, depending on where you were on that Sunday, January 2nd, all hell breaks loose starting any time from about noon onwards, depending on where you were.

Interviewee: I think that was one of the more extraordinary things about the Blizzard of 1949 was that it started unexpectedly, it brought with it high winds and deep snow, and it lasted much, much longer than most winter storms. It goes down in Wyoming history as one of those once in a generation or once in a century events, because it combined all of those qualities of surprise and ferocity that come with blizzards. One that sort of matches it in more or less general style are some that hit the Northern Plains in 1886-87 back in the hey day of the cattle industry, the open-range cattle industry, and those storms started in November, and then there were just a series of them that raked across Wyoming and Montana and did incredible destruction to the cattle industry. That's one that's very memorable in Wyoming history, and the Blizzard of '49 is the second that's the memorable one again, because it has those qualities of surprise and just the ferocious nature of the wind and the deep snow.

Interviewer: Of course, [00:02:00] by '49, the population of Wyoming had gone up quite considerable from '88, and so a lot more people were affected by the blizzard than in '88.

Interviewee: That's right. The Blizzard of '86-87 affected livestock, but there weren't a lot of people involved, because there were very few people living in those open range areas. But by 1949, the agricultural industry had changed, there were lots of people living on small ranches and farms around eastern Wyoming, and their neighborhood communities had a number of people in them. So you're looking at a population difference of say, 50,000 in 1886-87, and most of those long the railroad in the southern part of Wyoming, to around 250,000, 220,000 in 1949.

Interviewer: Yeah. So the storm blows in on Saturday, really doesn't let ... That first blast doesn't let up until Wednesday, and then it's kind of a whole series

of storms after that until pretty much ... Well, I think the last one they say blew through was February 20th.

Interviewee: That's right.

Interviewer: Was the end of it.

Interviewee: All of these storms came in waves, and you just think that the storm was over and you could dig out and shovel out, and scoop out all the snow out from around your place, and then here would come the next one. Again, it was the series of storms, too, that made the Blizzard of '49 such an extraordinary event in the state's history.

It was important economically, but also, I would contend that it was indeed a huge factor in the folklore of eastern Wyoming, because [00:04:00] I was a tiny child at the time, I was about six months old at the time, but I've heard the stories of what had happened on our ranch. We lived 13 miles north of Lusk in the Hat Creek country, and I was six months old at the time, but I vividly remember, or at least I think I remember, shoveling snow all through that Blizzard of 1949, and of course it's pretty impossible for a six-month-old to be shoveling snow, but the myths and the legends and the stories and the folklore were so significant to family and neighbors that even I got to thinking that I must have been there, and if I was there, I must have been doing something constructive.

Interviewer: These blizzards come in and essentially shut down the state. Transportation, trains are stopped. Of course, the roads are totally clogged up. No airplanes in or out, buses stalled, people stalled on the sides of the roads after visiting relatives for the holidays. It was just a huge shut down of the entire state until things started to get shoveled out.

Interviewee: That's right, and one significant thing about it is that it hit right at the end of the holidays, there were a lot of people who were away visiting family or friends. The University of Wyoming, of course, had taken the holiday season off, and so about the time of the second or third wave of these blizzards, there were students seeking to come back to Laramie and discovering that that was pretty impossible to get back into town. Just leaving from where they may have gone home, there were people from New Castle and Lusk and Wheatland [00:06:00] and all kinds of places. Even Rawlins and west of there that had real difficulties even getting out of their homes towns.

Interviewer: I talked to some folks that were going to the University of Wyoming at the time, and they said classes were cancelled for some time. It was during registration, I guess. Registration didn't go well, and some classes were cancelled for a while in Laramie.

Interviewee: What's extraordinary about it is that the University of Wyoming almost never closes down. There has to be really a pretty monumental event, snow event, for UW to cancel a class, and yet it did so frequently during the January and early February of 1949. The stories I've heard are a number of students came in from out of state and dodged the various storms and ended up being the only people staying in the dorms, and of course, the university was good about making sure that the cafeteria stayed open for them, but it was pretty hard going, because they were there, but nothing was happening on the campus. They were still trying to shovel out the roads from every direction to get into Laramie.

Interviewer: I guess the state highway department at first tried to get their snowplows out on the roads during that first storm, but quickly discovered that it was a losing proposition, and they just had to wait until the weather cleared up a little bit before they could get their snow plows really rolling and start to dig out Wyoming.

Interviewee: It was the combination of the heavy snow and the strong winds that created such huge snowbanks that the roadways would just be almost impossible to work through, because the snow would be three or four times the height of a highway department vehicle. They [00:08:00] can't very well tunnel through the snow, they're going to have to remove it, and it made it very, very difficult on roads, particularly Highway 85, US 20, US 30. Many of the major roads that people counted on to always be open were ones that were particularly difficult for the highway department to open up.

Interviewer: Right, and so the ... I guess after a time, Truman finally figures out that there's a real emergency in the west, and calls on General Pick to marshal his forces, and writes a blank check and tells him to get to work digging out the inter-mountain west, or basically the plains, Nebraska and eastern Wyoming, northern Colorado, southern South Dakota.

Interviewee: Mmhmm (affirmative). The Blizzard of '49 was ... actually wasn't felt very much in the Big Horn Basin up in the northwest part of the state, so people heard about it and read about it, but they didn't receive the same amount of snow or the wind and everything with it like the rest of the state was experiencing. It was pretty widespread throughout Wyoming,

but there were pockets where the blizzard missed, and the Big Horn Basin was one of those.

Interviewer: I guess a lot of ... The cities and towns, even though they were cut off, fared pretty well. I think a lot of them depended on railroad for getting in food supplies and such, so I guess some stores got pretty low, but I think people made it through okay. It's the ranchers in the outlying areas that were really, really isolated for sometimes weeks at a time, but then of course, these ranchwomen always put up stores of food, because they knew what could happen in Wyoming.

Interviewee: The serious thing about the ranches was [00:10:00] that even though there were usually ample food supplies, the problem was with a lot of the ranch animals, because a lot of them hadn't counted on such a long and prolonged blizzard and cold spell, too, because of course, they would have to make sure that the cattle were watered, because they have the stock tanks freeze up, and you'd have to go out and make sure that the cattle could get to water, because that was one of the big killers of livestock in the Blizzard of '86-87 was the fact that the cattle hadn't been able to get to water. Of course, by 1949, many ranchers had put up hay for winter emergencies, so it wasn't quite of the level of the '86-87 blizzard when they were relying entirely on the open range.

The one aspect that's interesting about the small towns is that Wyoming in those days was very well-served, generally, by railroad, and not only for passenger trains, but also most of the supplies that were brought into these towns came by rail. The fact that trucks couldn't make it on the highway was not quite as serious as one would have expected if we'd had a similar event, say now, because the railroads did haul a large share of the goods into the various cities and towns in Wyoming.

Interviewer: I guess there were a lot of trains, though, that were frozen to the tracks, and a lot of stalled trains, both passenger and freight trains through the duration of that series of blizzards.

Interviewee: That's right. The Union-Pacific, in particular, had a lot of these huge snowplows, and [00:12:00] normally they were able to cope with the snowbanks that they encountered between Cheyenne and Evanston, but during the Blizzard of '49, those things would get stuck, and they would just simply sit there on the tracks until such time as they could thaw out a little bit and they could drag it back and get it going again.

Interviewer: I guess it was the quality of the snow, too. I've heard reports that it was so incredibly dense, these snow drifts, that it was like packed ice, almost.

Interviewee: Yes, it wasn't like the kind of winter snow that comes down in drifts and it's sort of like powder on a ski run. This was snow that was pretty loaded with moisture. It was snow that was pretty loaded with moisture, and therefore it was far more difficult to move than it would have been had it been lighter snow.

Interviewer: Then I've heard reports of significant loss of cattle and significant loss of sheep in the state. Like you said, I don't think it was nearly as bad as '88, was it? '78?

Interviewee: It would be '86-87.

Interviewer: '86-87, but still, nothing to sneeze at. I mean I think some ranches fared better than others, but some really lost their shirts, too.

Interviewee: Mmhmm (affirmative). Well it was certainly an economic blow, because when you can't care for cattle over roughly a six-week period of just constant snow and wind and snowbanks and freezing temperatures, you're going to have some pretty major losses, and so there were places where ranchers were lucky to have their families in isolated ranch houses [00:14:00] without having to go out and check on the cattle. It would have been dangerous, and in fact there are cases of the ... I think there's some 19 people that perished in the Blizzard of '49 in Wyoming. That's not counting other states around us, but of that number, several were individuals who had gone out to check on their stock, and then got disoriented or lost in the blizzard and didn't make it back to the house.

Interviewer: Yeah, and some of these ranchers, I guess, were so desperate for getting hay to their animals that the Air Force stepped in with Operation Hay Lift, and were actually doing drops of bales of hay to certain ranches that they just couldn't get to their cattle.

Interviewee: That's right, and the planes would come in and circle around and the ranchers would sometimes be able to direct where those bales might land, and those were really significant and lifesaving for lots of livestock, for ranchers particularly in eastern Wyoming.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. I guess also there were some drops of supplies to ranch houses, too, where perhaps people needed medicine or some food stores, or maybe some packages of cigarettes or whiskey.

Interviewee: Some of that would be dropped from the air. Back in the late 1950s, my brother and I were exploring part of the ranch where we lived in Niobrara County, and we came upon what looked like an errant package that had

been dropped and had landed in some scrub pine up in the Hat Creek Breaks, and I remember particularly about it a red ribbon that was connected to the little small bundle, because it was to indicate to the rancher that there was something there, [00:16:00] that they should be able to have seen that red ribbon. I'm not sure exactly what happened to that package, why it was dropped rather far from the closest ranch house. But there were the remains some ten years later.

Interviewer: Did you open it? Was there ...

Interviewee: Well, there wasn't anything left of the contents.

Interviewer: Oh, sure. Yeah.

Interviewee: But the ribbon was there and then some netting, so it looked like it had been probably attacked by coyotes or something, whatever was in there.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well speaking of wildlife, I just got back from Game and Fish before we did this interview, and they were talking about the loss of wildlife, especially the antelope around Red Desert area took a big hit, mostly from trains, because the tracks were cleared off, and Highway 30 was cleared off around there, and they'd come down to the roads and really got wiped out. Of course, others were found, you know, like frozen statues, cattle was found like frozen statues. It was ...

Interviewee: But there'd be very few open cattle trails, or wildlife trails, so they would find one of those shoveled out areas, and of course naturally follow that, and along comes a train or along comes a car and pretty tragic for the livestock or for wildlife.

Interviewer: Yeah. Are you familiar at all with the story about Rockport, where that little bar or gas station, like some 300 people found refuge?

Interviewee: Not that ... I'm not familiar with that. I am familiar with a story, and this is probably where you'll cut, but I am familiar with the story that Tom Stroock used to tell about how he and John ... What's the guy, what's the teaching center at UW called? The ... Anyway, they were [00:18:00] young landmen that had just come to Wyoming, and they were returning from doing some land work up in the Big Horn Basin, and they hit the blizzard along Highway 20, and their car got stalled somewhere near Highland, I guess it was, and the fellow that was with Mr. Stroock had his old Princeton raccoon coat with him. He put on this Princeton raccoon coat, and he said, "Tom, you stay with the car and I'll go see if I can find anybody to help."

Just about then, an airplane circled overhead, and it was one of those Air Force planes that was dropping bales of hay to cattle, and all of a sudden, they both looked up and they saw a bale of hay flying out of the plane, because apparently, whoever was kicking hay out of the airplane thought that that guy in the raccoon coat was actually a distressed animal, and just darn near hit him with the bale of hay. Tom tells that a lot better, by the way, or told that a lot better than I just did.

Interviewer: Right, right.

Speaker 1: Do you remember the friend?

Interviewee: Ellbogen. It was John Ellbogen and Tom Stroock that were coming back from doing some work in the Big Horn Basin when their car became stalled along Highway 20 near Highland, and it was those two guys that were looking for help.

Interviewer: Right. Were there stories in your family about attics filling up with snow unbeknownst to them?

Interviewee: There were aspects like that, but what was particularly memorable to me was our ranch house was essentially under an entire [00:20:00] snowdrift, and so my dad had to shovel out these tunnels out of the front door, and of course you couldn't even see out of the windows, because it was just dark inside, and of course, in those days, we didn't have ... We hadn't yet hooked up to REA, so we didn't have electricity, except from a wind machine outside. It was pretty dark inside, because of course, you couldn't turn that thing on in a raging windstorm, and so the batteries had pretty well gone, and so we were sort of like moles down in that hole of that house as we waited for my dad to shovel out the front door and get out to the front to the house.

Interviewer: Did you use coal as heat?

Interviewee: Well, actually the house was equipped with propane stoves, by then. That was pretty early for that, in that part of Wyoming.

Interviewer: I guess a lot of ranch kids had a lot of chores to do, but a lot of kids were just being kids, and actually you were talking earlier about sliding down the snowdrifts, and just having a good time, whereas I would suspect their parents were probably becoming concerned after the storm after storm after storm kept roaring in?

Interviewee: Mmhmm (affirmative). Our neighbors, I've heard stories told by a lot of our neighbors from around the ranch up at Hat Creek, kids that were seven, eight, nine, 10 years old that just thought it was just the greatest time. They didn't have to go to school, and they could run out there and sled down these hills and throw snow around and never have to worry about going to school for six weeks, so it was a highlight in their education career, you might say.

Interviewer: [00:22:00] Right. These storms you know, blew through, and finally towards the end of February, it stops, and basically it starts warming up towards spring. I'm hearing various reports about people saying, "Yeah, it was this beautiful, green spring, because we had so much runoff," and other people will go, "It was the muddiest damn mess you ever want to see."

Interviewee: Mmhmm (affirmative), and I think the mud, it all depended on where you were living, because the mud would build up in some of those gumbo areas, particularly out north of Lusk, and it would be pretty miserable trying to get out from places like our ranch. Our ranch was kind of down in a bowl, just to the east of the Hat Creek Breaks, and I remember hearing about my dad having to take a tractor and trying to make it through the mud, all the way to the top of the hill to get to the paved highway. It was a good four miles or so from our place, and so just working his way out of the mud made it almost as bad as working out of the snow.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Now I guess a lot of fences were taken down by it, so there was a lot of fence mending to do in the spring, too.

Interviewee: Yeah, there was a lot of work. There was certainly a lot of buildings, too, that had been damaged by the heavy weight of the snow, or by the wind, so there were sheds and other out buildings at ranches that had to be repaired, so it was a costly clean up over a rather lengthy period of time, and so when you totaled up all the economic costs, you have to take that into account, as well. It was not just all of the delays from the blizzards stopping off traffic, but it was also the cost of repairing things after the blizzard was long gone. [00:24:00]

Interviewer: Right. I came up with, there was a figure, a final tallying of around 9 million for Wyoming, which would translate to roughly 10 times that amount today.

Interviewee: Mmhmm (affirmative). That would be putting it in pretty historic disaster, a pretty historic disaster class for Wyoming, because we don't have

things like hurricanes, and by and large, very few floods and tornadoes, but that was a pretty major natural disaster for our state.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's all I got. Do you have any other stories?

Interviewee: Well, I could probably think of some, but I think you got them all.

Interviewer: Okay, okay.

Interviewee: Yeah, because if you talked to my Aunt Ruth, she's the best, so. The one aspect that I think is very important about it is that folklore aspect, where it became by the 1970s, even by the '60s, it became a point of community attachment, because people who were there would share stories, and there was a certain amount of camaraderie that came out of surviving the Blizzard of '49. People were still talking about it into the 1970s.

By now, most of the people who were adults at that time have long gone, but for several decades, it was the point of weather comparison for every other winter that came along. "Well, what was it like? Well it was nothing like the Blizzard of '49. Might be close, but it's not anything like that Blizzard of '49."

Interviewer: Yeah, I've had people talking about just that very thing. There may have been some more snow accumulation and some harsher storms, [00:26:00] but not like the longevity of this thing, or the low temperatures, or just the crazy winds for such a long period of time.

Interviewee: That's right, and around Cheyenne, they often point at the winter of 1979 and '80 as a particularly bad one, with I think something like 150 inches of snowfall, but that came in a totally different way. It didn't come all at once in a series of storms, nor was there a lot of wind behind it, but again, there were some comparisons made even then, "Well, this is nothing like the Blizzard of '49. You should have been here when that happened, because that was really bad weather at that time."

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewee: That's all I have.

Interviewer: That's all I got, too.

Interviewee: Mmhmm (affirmative).

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: Okay.